Tree of Life

Myshu

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Summary

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If you do not stop her, you will become her. If you surrender, she will win. Some promises are tough to keep, if you can not see through the darkness. ...Do you understand?

1. Tree of Life

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(my disclaimer) Reviewing the definition of a fanfic here seems really redundant, considering the nature of this site, so I'm not going to waste brain cells explaining how and why the characters and setting belong to Square and the story belongs to me. I may ramble on a bit but this is my first posted fic here, so you have to cut me some slack… please? Oh, fine then.

I rated this fic R for general reasons. I'm too sleepy to explain them all in detail—just read and you'll understand. If it's any relief (or disappointment) to you, I don't write lemons or promote anything of that sort. However, if you try to read this story with a dirty mind, it will easily look suspicious.…Again, I blame lack of sleep. I state as much in my bio, but just to warn you here: I… lay on the modifiers… pretty thickly. Apologies for my preciosity in advance.

Anyway, this is the closest I've ever been to writing "surrealistic fanfiction." It's not AU, but rather my own crackpot "ending theory" that may or may not find itself accepted by the gaming masses. I hope someone likes it—I'm not writing these things for my health, you know. Well, maybe I am just writing for kicks, but what's wrong with that? (/my disclaimer)

(*"…just walk away… against my nature."*)

The darkness.

("…a real simpleton.")

It was his eternal bane. It was the singularity of his existence, towards which all other senses invariably converged, squashed into obscurity by the blinding blackness. The rain, the wind, the sun—none of nature's cavalry could penetrate this somber fortress. The black wall sealed him from the sustaining radiance outside.

("Promise me…")

In the beginning, the darkness was his blanket. He was void of awareness and embraced by a listless, dreamless slumber. There was no matter of

the impending day, or evening, or following night. There was no time. There was no alarm or call to rise and live anew, as each man had and would for every dawn from the start of history.

(*“…you do the same…?”*)

This limbo was a reality wherein nothing dwelled to bring him to himself. Awareness happened as inexplicably as Creation itself, and with as ginger an effort as a serpent’s glide into a pool. His being assembled in fragments. His sensations, his hearing, his sense of smell and taste, his orientation, and at length his own thoughts occurred to him.

(*“…pretty crazy.”*)

Being the first priority of any waking creature to assess itself, he vainly strove to peer into the abyss. Thwarted by the perpetual black, he sought reserves in his other senses. A vacuous howl, the like sought after in the pits of seashells, filled one ear. A tough, grainy texture scratched his numbed skin. A fine ash powdered his parched lips and tickled his nose, bringing into effect his first notion of movement. As his body convulsed with a sneeze he discovered his restrictions, and in these he startled himself. A tangle of ligneous arms shackled his limbs and suspended him in their clutches.

(“I’m useless…”)

As if, by mishap, his stirring had roused another snoozing beast, the arms tensed while reinforcements snaked around his body and tightened their coil. A fit of claustrophobia seized him as the serpentine fiends squeezed away his fickle breath and threatened to crush his ribs. Deep in panic, he swam against the sea of course-scaled snakes, with every stroke conjuring another rope to tie down his venture. His wild thrashing yielded no greater results than they would in a lake of quicksand. The grasping snakes overwhelmed him within seconds and throttled the idea of escape. Once completely submerged, his newfound, precious consciousness began to wane, and by the next moment the dark wave subdued him once more. Only the spectre of a voice haunted his last waking moment.

(*“No one’s useless…”*)

Such was the cycle of his awareness, and his only reliable calendar: a futile chain of habits to consecrate each morning, with the memory of the former ceremony too pale to advise or intervene.

First, he would wake and gather his senses. Then, without heeding any sensible memories, he would rediscover his restraints, panic, and fight them until they placated his tantrum. Reduced to dreams of nothing, he would revive the next day, oblivious to the last, and carry on the recursive war.

He inevitably arrived at a point—it can never be precisely judged—when his instinct was well enough trained in Newtonian mechanics to anticipate an overbearing reaction toward any of his frenzied actions. He approached consciousness with tamed reflexes, assessed himself for the final time, and quieted his movements.

He waited—patiently, silently. Waited for the imminent. Waited for those vindictive serpents to rise from the murky black and strangle him senseless again. Waited for them to exact the sentence the charge of freedom mandated.

Nothing happened.

Relief cued him to start breathing again when it happened that he neglected it. He was calm, and as long as he could keep himself so, his mind was at last free to roam about and speculate.

Where… am I?

The obvious question first. His habitat was no haven for light—that much was certain (unless he was blind, in which case he wouldn't notice either way). His doubted capacities aside, he found that there was little to feel, smell, or hear that would clue him towards any useful observation. Those dreaded ropes, as dry and itchy as ever, held clasped to every limb. A pall of silence deafened him. And oddly, a faint sting gnawed at the small of his back.

Where ever he was, he was going nowhere rather quickly. Other, less pressing enquiries shoved their way forward.

…Who am I?

It was a pathetic question, but not so to the one without an answer. He painstakingly mined through his cavernous memory, picking at and turning over any interesting stone, pebble, or mud clod, but ultimately to no avail. The jewel of his identity was entombed beyond his meager reach. There was as much worth in mining through the past as there was in sifting through the present.

He felt lost. And worse, he felt alone, estranged even to himself.

What am I… going to do?

Accept our fate.

It was an instruction. It emanated from everywhere. It had a colorless tone that resonated between his ears. His wits rattled, he recoiled into his thoughts with a reasonable question.

What was that?

I are you.

He felt himself blink. The voice tapped into his head. Could it read his mind? He tentatively experimented with a mute reply.

…What? You're who?

I are you. You am me.

It didn't even make sense, grammatically.

Excuse me?

I are you. You am me. We are symbiosis.

The only thing he was ready to accept was that he was losing his mind. That would naturally explain everything, especially the black void talking nonsense. Regardless of the state of his sanity, he entertained a conversation with "himself." If it was

nothing, it was someone to talk to. Perhaps someone with answers.

You're… me? We're… the same?

We are symbiosis, the nothing repeated.

Uh… what's that? What's "symbiosis?"

The response was worthy of a dictionary.

Symbiosis is a mutually advantageous interaction between two organisms living in close physical association with each other.

He digested that as best he could.

So… we're living together… and… helping each other?

Without symbiosis, we do not survive.

I… see, he feigned comprehension while groping for a more enlightening trail of answers. Was this demented colloquy his imagination's invention? Or was it real? It was too strange to believe, either way.

Was it always like this? Was I always, uh… His vocabulary clumsily accommodated the new addition.…*Symbiosis?*

The void was quiet.

…Hello?

Maybe he was imagining the voice, after all.

I are you. We are me. Symbiosis is always.

Maybe not.

Always? Was that his answer? Was it always like this? Was it always so dark? Was he always here?

It didn’t seem right. It didn’t *feel* right. His situation felt distinctly… unnatural. He felt he should be somewhere else. He felt there was somewhere to belong—somewhere he was needed—but he wasn’t there. That place wasn’t here.

But that was all. A feeling. Some hunch. No facts. Not a sliver of memory for it to fall on.

I… don’t remember.

Memory is collective. It is not yours to know.

What? The darkness’s fragmented responses were not resolving any of his issues, despite what he had hoped. *What does that mean? There wasn’t always this “symbiosis,” was there? Before this, you used to be by yourself, and so was I, right?*

Another disquieting pause. The dark finally procured another diversion for its parade of contradictory answers.

At one time, this was true.

He felt flushed with a lukewarm hope. His investigation perilously inched forward, like a mouse around a lion.

Okay… So, what did you… used to be? Who were you?

I was what I am. What you are.

As he feared, the conversation revolved around that puzzling article. He would've smacked himself in exasperation, had he means to untie himself and perform the feat.

Can't you talk in anything but riddles? Don't you have a name?

The nothing took a lengthy effort to process his question, as if it were computing a mathematical formula.

I am called Iifa. I am the great mother tree.

A tree, echoed his mind. He could have personally imagined a million or more answers that

were at least more believable. There was something uniquely disturbing about a riddle-spouting tree that he wasn't ready to explore. *I'm talking to a tree. About symbiosis. Maybe I am crazy.*

Subject is currently sound of mind.

He had slipped on the notion that the tree could read his thoughts. He snapped at the sentient plant.

Stop that! And what do you mean, "Subject?"

It conveniently ignored his command and elaborated on the question.

Subject is you.

He stared into the dark, stupefied. Granted that his name was "Subject," the tree couldn't even use it properly in a sentence. The sheer denotation of the word sparked a flicker of outrage in the pit of his soul. He developed an immediate, irrational loathing for it. "Subject" wasn't a name. It was a label.

That's not my name!

Then what is?

He faltered on the rhetoric.

…I… I'm… I don't know. But it sure as hell isn't "Subject."

Hell is a fabulous, abstract location. It is incapable of assertion.

The tree wasn't very familiar with figures of speech, apparently.

…Just forget it.

Hell. Maybe this was it—damnation to an eternal, one-sided conversation with a plant named Iifa. He suddenly longed for the fire and brimstone. A giant talking tree would make good tinder.

He yet again fished into his reservoir of questions.

So… Iifa, right? He tested the mechanically produced name. After a pause adequate enough for the objection that didn't arise, he continued. *Where are we?*

We are located on Gaia's north-eastern continent, on the Pualei Plains.

Geographically speaking, the answer was perfectly valid. It told him nothing.

Uh… right. Well, how did I get here?

We were always here.

We were? I don't remember.

Why did he feel like he was starting this conversation over? He shrugged off the pang of deja-vu and wondered how many times he could employ amnesia as an excuse before Iifa became impatient with his nosy probing. Then he wondered if Iifa was capable of expressing impatience.

Symbiosis is our most recent association. Symbiosis was not always true, but Iifa has always been here, since the cycle began.

He pursued the negative. *You said symbiosis wasn't always true, just like before. So you mean that we weren't always together. If you were always here, then where was I before now? Before symbiosis?*

He was positive he felt the tree shudder around him. He doubled back on the question of Iifa's patience, sensing that he had finally struck the root of it. An abrasive growth coiled snugly around his middle as the plant began to forcibly assert its answers. He winced at the pointed sting that pricked his spine.

You am me. There was no before anymore.

A swarm of netlike stems secured him and covered the last inches of exposed skin, cloaking him in a net of vines. He willed his enfeebled limbs to tear the cage apart, but a helpless panic prevailed.

Iifa, wait! Please!

Iifa's closing words were ominously prophetic.

We are symbiosis. We will be forever.

There was darkness again.

His was a peculiar, limited existence. Buried within Iifa's living cage, the range of available activities could be narrowed to two: sleep and think, with the former serving both as a pastime and a punishment, when required. He didn't eat—for some reason he never had to. Without eating, he could omit several of the accompanying life processes.

Sleep was a dull affair, for he rarely dreamed, and it therefore held little entertainment. His few scant episodes were clouded over by consciousness within moments, and those that survived his waking were undecipherable and duly uninteresting. As a point, the most dwelled-on object of his dozing was a single blue light. This sometimes stirred something

relevant within his deepest, hidden reflections, but the nature of it he could never unravel.

Thinking, on the other hand, was a plethora of activities on its own. The library of the world was at the whim of his curiosity. Iifa was a sentient warehouse of knowledge and history. In a former life of hers (he had taken to addressing the “great mother tree” in the feminine, despite the sexless nature of trees), Iifa was a gatekeeper of the dead. She was the final stop for souls venturing away from their discarded bodies. As these lost lives shrank into the core of the planet to rejoin the ‘cycle of souls,’ Iifa’s roots “assimilated” them, carefully “refined” them (these processes were never thoroughly explained to him, but he was assured that refined souls once constituted the tree’s primary source of energy), and the byproduct of this work, something called Mist, was meticulously discharged back through the roots, to blanket the southernmost continent in a thick, perpetual haze (he was impressed to learn that Iifa’s reach virtually extended around the planet.)

But that was a matter of the past. Iifa’s reign over the afterlife, and thereby the planet, was no more—it dissipated with the noxious, omnipresent Mist. However, every soul that once met its end at Iifa’s

“refinery” left behind its most precious keepsake: its memories. The retained memories of every living creature to walk Gaia’s continents and swim its seas in the past thousand years remained interred within Iifa’s now vestigial roots. The unwritten history of the world was the mother tree’s common knowledge.

Ergo, it was his, as well. Anything one would ever want to know was his to attain. Science, mathematics, literature—ask, and Iifa would share. So he did, with a reserved hope that something someone remembered somewhere would clue him towards the piece of knowledge he sought above all: his identity.

Iifa, however, was sometimes finicky in censoring her library. The closer his researching drew towards the present, the more lives were… omitted. Entire pages of history seemed to be missing. At first, he blamed his imagination, or accounted for Iifa’s incoming sources, recently dwindled to nothing.

Sometimes, however, the convenience of the editing was too suspicious to overlook. When he voiced a purposeful question or complaint to it, Iifa would respond irrationally, or even violently, as she did when he wondered of his past, before

“symbiosis.” Trial and error eventually taught him to avoid such sensitive topics, even at the expense of never learning anything remotely fruitful. Iifa would, in more words or less sense, explain that it was none of his business, which he found ironic, because that was the only thing he considered to be his business.

So, to stave off eternal boredom, he would spend his incarceration entertaining the more innocuous subjects. Reading was an interesting experience, in that he was the only person on Gaia with the talent to finish a novel without turning a page, or even opening his eyes. He “thought” his way through countless tales of adventure, warfare, romance, and tragedy. He especially developed a taste for the works of Lord Avon (“I Want to be Your Canary” was his favorite, although he could never reasonably explain why he favored it.)

Once in a while, he fancied a game of skill or strategy, such as chess or cards, and nagging lured Iifa into a challenge. These games were just as much a fancy as anything else they did; neither had access to any likeness of a card deck, and couldn’t read the faces of the cards if by chance they had some. It was truly a game of pretense. He “let on” to possess the necessary accessories, and the entire contest was

endured on the field of the imagination. It was rarely, by a chance, that he won, but such victories were drained of flavor because the consequence of every match was just as much to Iifa was the weather, and carried that much stock with her, if not less.

He was hardly a scientist, much less an engineer, but he nevertheless kept up with the mechanical theories that evolved into the development of the mist engine, and even toyed with the idea of models that could function without the hazardous vapor. When Iifa finally informed him that this had already been invented, he felt somewhat disheartened (and perplexed, for he couldn’t investigate how and when that happened) and gave up.

Mathematics was a mere game to him. He found three different ways to prove the Pythagorean Theorem. He rediscovered and then calculated the mathematical constant pi out to thirty-two places. He solved formulas with the same fervor that others would devote to word puzzles or chess matches with themselves. His number games were more often a device of therapy than a source of entertainment. He was forever wary of losing his head to his environment, and a busy mind warded off

derangement. The games also supplied an almost medicinal distraction…

He was once adding his way to the fiftieth number in the Fibonacci sequence when he was presently interrupted.

102,334,155… carry the one… 165,580,141…

What is subject doing?

He jumped, figuratively.

Subject, he echoed condescendingly, while striving to keep his place mentally book marked, *Is figuring out the Fibonacci sequence.*

What is that?

Considering that she could look up the answer for herself as easily as she could ask him, he was slightly miffed.

You find the next number in the sequence by taking the sum of the two previous numbers.
165,580,141… one over five, plus three… 267,914,296… one over seven, plus five… 432,494,437…

433,494,437, Iifa corrected.

Huh? Oh, right. 433,494,497…

433,494,437, she reiterated.

I knew that. Four hundred thirty-three million, four hundred ninety-four thousand… Um… four, seven…

…damnit.

Problem?

You made me lose my place.

Iifa is sorry, she apologized blandly.

Yeah, I'm sure you are, he remarked sardonically. *Don't you have something better to do? Like leaving me alone?*

Subject is angry.

Thank you, Miss Obvious.

Subject is being… facetious?

Subject wants to be left alone. He couldn't believe he was identifying himself with her third person, even for the sake of a rhetoric victory.

We had no intention to induce anger. Negative emotions are not conductive of—

—*Shut up!* He registered the use of the royal "We" as a forebear to that word he was beginning to loathe more than his superficial name.

Iifa, for once, was obediently quiet. The protracted, literal silence that followed was almost as agitating as the plant's incoherent rambling. It tempered his humor and itched his conscience. He discretely chastised his bitter disposition, and traced the circumstances that provoked it. He was normally forgiving towards Iifa's eccentricities and patient with her intrusions, but today he was unusually sensitive.

A prick of discomfort refreshed his memory. Fibonacci's special numbers were the day's prescribed diversion for a reason: they directed his concentration away from the pain.

The pain was his personal scourge. It was a kneading paw that etched away at his back, and all his sore squirming never amounted to any relief. He tried to ask after the source of the ache, once or twice, but Iifa allowed that it was an accoutrement of symbiosis, and he was forced to content with that. It was initially a tolerable feature of his existence, but as time wore his resistance away, it evolved into an increasingly unbearable reality. He could feel its

stinging burn burrow into him at a miserably slow pace; so much that weeks would claim an inch deeper, and weeks more before he suspected the infection's growing hold on him.

However, it was worse to dwell on its influence than to employ simple arithmetic to keep his mind off his troubles.

He reconciled the source of his sour mood with himself, and opened his thoughts to Iifa again. It stirred his pride to reflect on this ability to mask his musings from Iifa's omniscience. It was a skill honed through weeks of training, but one that only served him for brief periods. Working with it for more than a few minutes incurred headaches.

Sorry, he finally relented. *Iifa, can I ask you something?*

Subject proved the capability of proposing an enquiry with the enquiry.

That's not what I…

He abandoned the logomachy before he disregarded his point.

…Never mind. Iifa, you know absolutely everything there is to know about everything. About

history, and science, and math, and culture…

Yes, she confirmed.

So why the hell can't you use proper grammar?!

She actually tried to think about it for a turn.

…Iifa does not understand.

And failed.

He thought himself to have howled with frustration. *Of course you don't. That's my point. Ugh… I give up.*

This he said in defeat, but his heart was never behind it. He could never acquiesce to Iifa's point-blank cold reasoning. He couldn't give up his right to ask and wonder. The tree was all he ever had to talk to, but their conversations were always just that way—bipolar and monotonous. All the world could share, and he could learn, would ultimately amount to nothing without an intelligent sounding board. He looked to Iifa for what she couldn't be and couldn't have: an opinion. Her arguments were insipid; her facts were incompatible; even her voice carried all the emotive qualities to be envied in chanting monks.

Yet, he persisted. He asked, and she answered. He longed, one day, some way, to pry out of her the semblance of an independent thought.

He was blissfully asleep the day he learned his second most despised word.

With the library of memories and his amusement with mathematics exhausted, sleep was another, less demanding alternative to enduring grueling days of numbing pain and Iifa's inane drivel.

The maternal tree roused him from hibernation as gently as possible. An infant vine, cool and smooth, stroked his cheek.

Wake up.

The words were distant in his foggy dreams. He proffered a low, purring grunt from the bottom of his voice, and retreated into slumber. Iifa persisted. The wiry tentacle twined around a lock of his hair and combed it behind his ear. Her delicacy in the effort was unorthodox by her usual blunt, straightforward standard of treatment.

Please awaken.

Now genuinely awake, but not ready to cooperate, her subject passively resisted her. He fixed himself in place, purposely motionless, and feigned snoring.

Not to be outwitted, or outlasted, Iifa continued to play with his hair and teasingly brush his skin with her leafy finger. He couldn't hold up to her game for very long. A chuckle hiccupped out.

"Hee… Hehe…"

The wily vine skimmed the bridge of his nose and rubbed a soft spot beneath his chin. He couldn't take it anymore, and a grin tugged the corners of his lips.

"Hee, hehe." *Iifa…* "Hehe…" *Okay! That tickles.* "Hehehehe." *Cut that out!*

Iifa relented. **Remove what? Iifa wants to ask Subject something.**

He yawned and flexed his confined limbs as far as they were afforded. *Well, I'm up, already. What do you want?*

Iifa requests a service out of courtesy.

This was a foreign notion.

Are you asking me for a favor?

That is correct.

He wasn't accustomed to being asked for anything. He had virtually nothing to give, after all, and Iifa usually took what she wanted from him, regardless of permission.

Well… what is it?

Homeostasis is noncompliant with an overabundance of water. Iifa would like—

—Homey-what?

The textbook definition followed.

Homeostasis is the natural tendency towards equilibrium, as a function between interdependent elements maintained by physiological processes.

…Uh, right… whatever. What were you saying about water?

The monsoon has brought floodwaters to the Pualei Plains.

Monsoon?

Seasonal winds produce long-term periods of rainfall in most tropical climates.

It's raining? He would never know if Iifa didn't say so. He was buried beyond the capacity to monitor the weather.

Excess quantities of water threaten homeostasis. Iifa wants Subject to assist in relieving internal water pressure.

Well… sure, I guess. What does that mean, exactly? What do I do?

No action is required of Subject. Subject should absorb excess water from Iifa without conscious effort.

Whoa, wait a second! When you say "absorb" do you mean that I… uh… take on water? Literally?

Subject will not cooperate?

He couldn't intelligently articulate what it was about Iifa's request that was disturbing.

Well, I… I mean… Just how much water are we talking about, here?

Only slight discomfort should occur.

That didn’t make him feel any better about it, nor did it answer his question. He reluctantly agreed, still bewildered towards the whole procedure.

Well… okay. Go ahead, I guess.

Iifa is grateful.

As he waited for the “slight discomfort” to arrive, the other disturbing aspect of their conversation irked him.

Hey, Iifa?

Yes?

Why did you even bother asking? You normally do these kinds of things whether I care or not.

The answer was as surprising as he could expect from a talking tree.

Iifa is exercising her study of human conduct and courtesy.

He could have laughed.

You’re trying to learn manners?

Is this humorous? she wondered, analyzing his incredulous note.

Maybe. He snorted, in fact amused by her attempt to act “human.”

You know what would be really good manners, Iifa?

What is that?

Not waking people up to ask them for weird favors.

Iifa was quieted, and he felt at once satisfied and guilty. Shaking the negative emotions off, his mind roamed about the roots’ library, for only the sake of restlessness. After briefly tracing his way through time, a hole in the plot of history muddled him. It was perhaps trivial, and he had glanced over the hitch numerous times before, but today he decided to risk an explanation from Iifa.

Iifa? You there?

Yes, Iifa replied, overlooking the redundancy.

I was wondering about something.

Oh?

Some of these memories tell me that there’s a village in the middle of the woods, somewhere on

this continent. The dwarves in Conde Petie do some trading with it.

This is true.

Then how come I can't find any memories from anyone who's actually lived there?

He was belatedly aware of the question's dangerous implications. It was redolent with the theme of censorship that Iifa didn't kindly respond to when interrogated. He began to grow anxious when his answer was delayed.

Iifa eventually procured some facts without a grudge, to his relief.

The memories of that village are impossible to assimilate.

Why?

The inhabitants possess no souls.

This struck him as peculiar.

How is that possible? All living things have souls, don't they?

That is a common fallacy.

Then what kinds of things could live in that village? What kinds of people don't have souls?

Black mages and genomes.

Neither race rang familiar with him.

What are black mages?

Animated weapons. Products of the Mist.

They were created by Mist?

They are of the Mist, but inventions of man and machine.

Oh… so people made them out of Mist. I get it. But, what were they made for?

Their typical application was in warfare.

You mean, like soldiers? People built soldiers to fight for them?

Yes.

Oh. That sounds like a good idea. I mean, if you've got a bunch of soulless robots duking it out, that kinda cuts down on casualties.

It's funny, though; I can't see black mages in anyone's memories. When did all this happen?

It is not Subject's concern.

That signaled the end of Iifa's compliance. He cautiously moved on.

Erm… so, what are those other things? Genomes?

Genetically-engineered vessels. Living drones.

Drones?

They function without purpose, and exist without souls.

Oh. That's weird. Then what do they do? They just exist, for no reason?

Iifa hesitated. The lingering pause was enough for him to reconsider himself.

…Well, I guess I could say the same thing about humans, or dwarves, or anybody else. I guess nobody needs an excuse to exist.

He flirted with curiosity.

So, how did they get here? Did they just evolve on their own? Or did somebody make them, like the black mages?

When Iifa's vines started to bristle around him, he promptly retracted the offending enquiries.

Um, nevermind, okay? Forget I asked.

She took his word for it, and the walls of his cage slacked. He sighed deeply, enjoying the privilege of breathing.

The "excess water" made itself known in short time.

…Oh.…um…

What is wrong?

…Nothing, I guess… I think that "homeostasis," or whatever, is starting to work.

Does Subject feel well?

He grimaced. It was more uncomfortable than Iifa presumed. He wondered how much heavier he was, now.

I feel kinda bloated, to tell the truth.…Makes me feel like I'm gonna be sick.

Iifa is sorry. Iifa thanks Subject for assistance. Homeostasis requires proper water displacement.

Is this more of your "good manners?"

Can Subject tell? Iifa is… flattered.

Are you just saying that, or is it really true?

She weighed both possibilities.

…Would it be impolite to answer the former?

He smiled cynically. *You're hysterical, Iifa.*

Verily? In what manner does Iifa display unstable behavior?

…Nevermind.

She did so, and peace resumed in the bowels of her trunk while Iifa contemplated her subject's figures of speech. He meanwhile closed his eyes and beckoned slumber, but was disappointed. Unable to escape it, he was left to contend with a spell of nausea. He would have been sick, had the circumstances afforded it, but as far as Iifa was concerned, food was a superfluous luxury, and he didn't know the taste of anything going down, much less in reverse.

A rubbery bubble swelled in his throat, and he blanched and moaned with discomfort.

…Iifa?

Yes?

I think I like homeostasis about as much as I like symbiosis.

It was raining again that day. He knew this—never because he could hear its massaging drum on Iifa's trunk and leaves, or feel the trickling damp seeping through the pores of her bark; he knew because it was Iifa to know that her roots were drawing in water, and thanks to homeostasis, that was enough.

Rain used to be an exotic circumstance, particularly on the Pualei Plains. His studies provided that in the days of the Mist, it was hardly a necessity, but now, in the dewy vapor's absence, the planet's climate had lapsed into a dependency on water's timeless cycle of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. He also knew, through that same eclectic resource that taught him everything, that since the passing of the Mist, the vicinity of Iifa had undergone a remarkable rejuvenation, transfiguring from pale desert to fledgling jungle. It gave him a humble pleasure to reflect on this and inwardly remark that, very nearby, life was going on and

flourishing. But sometimes, it touched a deep wound, one that pined for a material experience.

As if to pervert his wish, his literal wound throbbed with an infectious pain. On some days it was tolerable, and others regarded it with more negligence, but that rainy day was not going to allow him rest. He cringed, fighting to contain an extravagant reflex. Iifa was lately more patient with his compulsive movements that she had once been, but he was still careful not to excite her needlessly.

Unfortunately, she also became acutely perceptive of her subject's habits, and knew an aberration when she sensed one.

Subject is behaving strangely.

Thanks for noticing, he retorted bitterly, checking the strained tinge to his mind's voice. A burning lash contorted his posture, and he choked on his efforts to conceal his symptoms.

Subject is… in pain.

She wasn't asking. She just knew. He hadn't before granted that Iifa understood the concept of pain outside its literal denotation. Perhaps he shouldn't have been, but he was surprised, and that stunted his malice towards her pointed logic.

…*Y-yes*, he dumbly responded. *Subject is in a lot of pain.*

A dreadful stillness pervaded Iifa's psyche, and he assumed that she was considering something important—that is, important by her standards, which he never measured with.

…*Iifa?*

She began to express her concern in the usual fashion. A probing vine tensed around his leg. This stray feeler triggered his alarm, however. It had slipped beneath his notice and his clothes, invading through an open end of his pants near the ankle.

Of all the personal effects Iifa irrevocably confiscated, his clothes were his last, retainable vestige of individuality. They were not especially practical in his situation, for the mother tree's hug warded off the chills of his environment, and some of it was itchy and confining, besides. In fact, the general inconveniences of a tropical climate long ago compelled him to wrest out of his shoes (with Iifa's consent, of course.) He didn't value clothing's protection from the elements, however. A wordless voice behind his materialism desired protection against Iifa, herself.

As he reviewed their unspoken contract, the presuming vine began to slide up his thigh. Automatically taking offense, he steeled himself against it.

Hey, hey, HEY! What are you doing?!

Subject is excited.

The deadpan appellations Iifa insisted on giving the obvious never ceased to amaze him.

Is that what you call it?! You're getting in my clothes!

Is there a problem? Do you have an objection?

He scoffed in astonishment of her ignorance of privacy.

Are you joking? I'm about to be violated by a tree! Yes, I have several objections! Just what do you think you're doing?!

Symbiosis should have no obstructions.

If by "obstructions" you mean "clothing," I like my clothes and you're staying out of them!

It was petty, but his basic possessions were all he had left. Why couldn't she understand?

Why do you cling to purposeless material possessions? Iifa broke into his lamentations. **They are a hindrance to symbiosis.**

He didn’t care about symbiosis. He just wanted to be himself. What was wrong with that?

Individuality is not in accord with symbiosis.

Was she answering him? Could she hear his dissent through his meditative barrier? Was she listening all along?

Iifa knows all.

She was.

He hadn’t seen the light of day since he first became aware, but he was now familiar with the color white by the feel of it in his complexion. It was a joke. A long, terrible joke. He was never hiding from her. He couldn’t. She was with his every breath and thought, no matter how well guarded, and she said nothing to it. Why?

We are symbiosis. There is no I. There was no you.

That said, there was no arguing with her conviction. Their old war was inflamed once again. He battled his constrictions and pummeled the

serpent with the heel of his other foot. The denim of his trousers, formerly his sense of security, ironically muffled the assault. The tentacle eased up his leg unimpeded, like liquid sand.

His rusty voice whimpered protest, while his thoughts projected with fierce volume, demanding and desperate.

Hey… cut it out! No! I said stop it! Iifa!!

Iifa, as always, held the power of veto. She didn't stop.

Resistance is not conductive of symbiosis.

He couldn't believe what was happening. He wasn't really sure what was happening, but before, he could reside in a comfortable delusion of safety. Iifa wasn't the warmest companion, in any respect, but she protected him, like an investment. It was poor business to attack your own investment, after all. To that limited extent, he was in control of the situation—this "symbiosis." He didn't feel that way anymore. He felt threatened now, and with all the primal instinct of a feral animal, he was going to resist. His squirming, whatever good it wrought, persisted.

Iifa was not daunted. The tree, typically reactive towards her subject's violence, was now distressingly nonchalant as her weedy claws scratched the hide on his back. More of her vines slithered up his ankle, and others down the collar of his shirt, digging in as if they were trying to take root in his flesh. He perceived something akin to being stuck with needles, a sensation he could only relate to via rented memories.

He cried piteously as the incessant sting in his back throbbed with a revitalized, blistering pain, like burning coal. Between fits of hysterical coughing, he wrestled with his unpracticed voice to turn out loud his first sentence.

"W-what are you doing?!" he wailed hoarsely. "S-stop it… stop! Iifa, please!!"

His heart flew into a tantrum. It felt like a drowning rodent in his chest, thrashing and kicking to get out.

(*"…He's still alive."*)

Why wouldn't she stop? Why wouldn't she answer him? What was happening to him?

(*"…I can't just leave him. There's no way I could live with myself."*)

Why was he hearing these voices *now*?

(“The Iifa Tree is beginning its violent reaction.”)

A twinge sliced through his middle, clutching his nerves and wringing his innards from the inside. His muscles iced over and caged the air in his lungs. He stirred himself to free it, but only whispered hiccups straggled out. He was blind, even to the dark, from flashes of this vivid new pain. The second slash doubled back over him, and a tearing spasm pitted him against Iifa’s restrictions.

(“Why are you doing this!?”)

The pain and panic boiled together in his throat, and swallowing it made him sick. Why couldn’t he just pass out, like all the other times?

The third swipe jarred the breath out of him, wrenching out a sob with it. The strength to inhale gave in to screams, which seared his throat, already hoarse with disuse. He fought for fickle gasps between increasingly protracted fits of agony.

He wanted to get out. He wanted to be far away. He didn’t have any means or reason greater than the reflex of flight. He didn’t know what Iifa was trying

to do, but his gut was awfully ardent about dreading it, to the extreme of inducing physical illness.

(*“No, that’s not the reason.”*)

He never felt quite so vulnerable for all his life he could remember. As Iifa trespassed on his last, meager defense, his own clothes, he couldn’t keep his ground any more. He was utterly at the mother tree’s mercy.

Iifa! Iifa!! Please… oh please… What’s happening to me??

Painful involuntary contractions of the muscles due to foreign stimuli and overexertion.

He was lacking patience with the dictionary.

In fucking Gaian, please!!

Cramps.

Cramps?! he echoed, exasperated with her gross oversimplification. *Bull shit!!*

What does Subject mean? Response was not in appropriate context.

It’s a figure of— “Gah!” Another caustic lash ripped up his spine, and his stomach lurched into his

chest.

Iifa does not comprehend dialectal idioms.

Subject doesn't feel like explaining them!!

His slight figure anguished under the torture, and his cries rose and fell in pitched waves. Yet another stroke of pain surprised him by provoking a retch, and his next cough filled his mouth with a bitter syrup. He gagged and swallowed what he could, while the rest spilled down his chin and soaked the front of his shirt. He had been acquainted with this condition before, but only from the graphic, final memories of soldiers, ones Iifa had harvested at their knell from the battlefields of the ancients.

…I'm bleeding.

Iifa was going to kill him. She was tearing him apart from the inside out. He was pierced with terror for his life.

I'm dying. I'm going to die. No… please… Iifa!

Another lash. It burned like hellfire. His frame contorted miserably in Iifa's locked grip.

What did I do? Why did I deserve this?? What did I do wrong…?

Another lash. He screamed.

Iifa!! Please!! Answer me! Why!? Oh… please…! I just… Why? I just… want to die now… Make the pain stop…

Death. He wasn't previously inclined to meet such a brutal end, but now, it felt proper. Perhaps this truly was hell. He could only imagine the horrible, criminal deeds he had committed to tarnish his wretched life—a life he couldn't remember—and merit this enduring anguish.

Did he steal? Did he kill? Did he rape? Did he betray?…Did it matter now?

Rivulets of blood slipped away and blotted his tattered garments until they clung heavily to his limbs like dishrags. He shuddered in disgust. His eyelids brimmed with a watery despair.

Please… make it… stop…

It occurred to him, then, on the threshold of tears: the absolute absence of control. He had no power. He had no voice. He was nothing greater than a living battery, fit for Iifa's needs and cold whims. His existence was petty and pathetic—an insult to Genesis. He was beneath even the black mages and genomes that walked the world freely, soulless and

useless, but independent to themselves. They, their purpose beneath even his own, would still never compare with him, for even as empty shells they embodied the right to live, as he did not, and even as they would feel, and see, yet never know the meaning—what it means to live—they would define it, and he would not.

But he knew. And understood. And hated it.

He hated nothing more than to live as he was, because he was wrong, and he was not living.

(“I had nothing left… nothing more to lose.”)

“Iifa…” He sniffled, repressing a cardinal humour leaking from his nose. It was disconcerting to realize that he couldn’t identify which one it was. “P-Please……kill me. Make it stop… please kill me… p-please…”

Iifa finally responded, but not in the manner he directly requested. His teeth gritted at the sloppy sound of peeling flesh as a tendril, greased with vital fluids, withdrew from the cavity between his ribs and crawled up his shoulder like a vile slug. It fitted around his gullet, and other tentacles migrated to it, completing the noose.

Subject is not ready.

“…wha…?” he weakly croaked as the serpents set about their favorite chore.

When Subject is ready, there will be no more pain.

Iifa’s remedy, her time-honored panacea for any matter pertinent to her subject, was incidentally the least anticipated method, and his skin recoiled as the stubble-scaled snakes effected their strangle on him. She reinforced his subjugation by arresting his consciousness.

Sleep.

So he did, already resigned to her. He didn’t object; there was no room for it anymore. As the asphyxia set in and his awareness dulled, the pain that plagued him was drowned in sleepy apathy, and the sense of bondage evaporated in the hazy embrace of an uncannily familiar darkness.

(“You are completely oblivious.”)

As Iifa put him to sleep, he prayed it was the eternal darkness.

(“You stand before the final dimension, and I am the darkness of eternity…”)

…Is it over?…

I hope it’s gone…

No more pain… not ready…

…so tired…

I want… to sleep… forever…

(“How do you prove that you exist…?”)

(“Is the will to live that powerful?”)
Is it?

(“All things live to perish.”)
Do they?

(“World very simple place.”)
How?

(“…strong live… weak die…”)
Why?

(“…truly deserving of my love.”)
Love?

(*“…with all the problems in the world, you’d think there would be more answers.”*)

Those voices are back again…

(*“…just want to protect the people I’m with.”)…*
I can still feel the pain.

It’s natural.
(*“…because I wanted to go with you.”*)

Your body’s resisting.

Resisting… what?

(*“…Where is this?”*)
Who are these voices?

(“The birthplace of all things…”)
Don’t they sound familiar?

…*No…*

(“For once in your life, why can’t you be honest!?”)

What is it you want, more than anything?
What is your fondest desire?

My fondest desire…?

Is it money?
Fame?
Power?

…No… What good would those things be to me? I can't use them.

Then what do you want?
("Foolish creature…")

Freedom?
("Your fears have already deluded you.")

Your life?

…Am I dead?

You are, if that's what you want.

I want the pain to stop. I want it to be over.
("One day, you will choose destruction over existence…")

…I don't want to exist anymore.

Do you greet death so openly?

("All life bears death from birth.")

Would you so readily end your existence, without knowing the truth?

Truth…?

("You said you'd become my angel of death…")

Who is Subject?

Subject?

Who is Subject?

…I'm Subject.

Who is Subject?

I am!

Who is Subject?

Me, damnit! I'm Subject!
("I'm gonna die anyway…")

Is that your name? Are you Subject?

Yes, I'm Subject! Who the hell are you?!

(*"Wouldn't you do the same for me if you knew I was dying?"*)

I am… Subject.

What?!

("I exist for one purpose…")
It is whole soon.

What's going on??

("As long as there is life and death…")
It will be complete.

(“…what the people of Terra want.”)
There will be no more pain.

Terra…?

(“They will begin a new life in a new dimension.”)
Two will become one.

(“It’s a world in which life and death become one…”)
We will become I.

(“In a world of nothing, fear does not exist. This is the world that all life desires.”)
I are you.

(“Maybe we don’t exist…”)
You am me.

We
Will
Be
Forever.

(“I… am… an empty… vessel…”)

I hear… music?…Someone’s singing.
Who is it?

It is no one.

But I hear her.

She is nothing.

If she's nothing… then what am I?

What are you?

I don't know…

Don't you?

Why do you keep answering me with questions? I asked first.

(I hear her voice…)
Remember?

No! How would I?
Who is she?
I feel like I'm choking.

You are.

I can't breathe!

She won't kill you.

I won't die?

You're too valuable to her.

Iifa?

Yes.

Who are you? Are you Iifa?

Am I?

…I don’t know anymore.

You don’t remember.

Why can’t you just tell me who you are? I’m sick of head games.

She does not want you to know. It would interfere with—

—Symbiosis. I know.…What is symbiosis?

You said you know.

…Why is symbiosis?

Answer me!

Why is life?

Life? What are you talking about?

The cycle began… many ages ago.
Gaia was fresh. Terra was dying. Terra wanted Gaia for itself.

Terra? Is that another world, like Gaia?

The seed was planted. Iifa became Yggdrasil.

Ygg-whata?

The link between heaven, earth, and hell.

I don't get it.

The black mages and genomes became Terra's instruments. Weapons, and empty vessels.
Reapers and harvesters.

Of what?

Souls.

Souls?

Garland created the genomes. The angel created the mages. To kill, for the other to reap.
Iifa to divide the shares. To be the judge and the link.

The "angel?" Who, Garland?

No, Kuja.

You're losing me.

You've been lost.

Who's Kuja?

The first subject.

You mean there were others before me??

He was the first. You are the last.

…Last?

Kuja was defeated. Iifa could not use him. He was expired.
Then came the next.
He was vulnerable. More importantly, he was alive. He became symbiosis.

They… are… the same.

The same? What? Who? I don't understand.

Terra was to assimilate Gaia to preserve its life.
To escape eternal death.

Assimilate…?
That's the word Iifa used when she absorbed dead people's souls and took their memories.
Are you trying to say that planets have souls, like people?

Is Terra… Gaia?

No.

Why not?

The cycle was aborted.

How?

Kuja wanted everything… or nothing. He became the angel of death. Gaia's… and Terra's.
The subject lives on. The other… gone.

What's gone? Terra?

Without Terra, Iifa was without purpose. Iifa was to abort Gaia.

Abort?

The death of one means the other.

Iifa was going to destroy Gaia??

It was the end of a purpose.

But, she didn't.

No.

Why?
Why didn't Iifa destroy Gaia??

Why is symbiosis?
Why is life?
Are they… the same?
Is life the same as death?

No… Nothing you're saying makes sense.

You're the one who can't make sense.

What??

Iifa spared Gaia to spare Iifa.

What does that mean? Why are you telling me all this?? What's the point?!

Subject's energy becomes Iifa's.
Terra's souls become Gaia's.

His body becomes hers.
Gaia's life becomes Terra's.

Yours is mine.
Terra becomes Gaia.

I are you.
Two become one.

You am me.
We become I.

Symbiosis will be forever.
Assimilation will be forever.

Do you understand?

I am… Gaia.

He started from his surrealistic epiphany, craving air in gulps and slimy with a gloss of perspiration, ash, and blood that suffused his nostrils with the scent of stale vegetables and licked the back of his throat with the coppery musk of death. His eyes snapped open, a waking reflex that, in the black realm, did no better than to distinguish consciousness from otherwise.

He couldn’t see the darkness anymore.

He saw the ruins of Burmecia. He saw Odin annihilating Cleyra. He saw Atmos devouring the skyscrapers of Lindblum. He saw Bahamut besieging Alexandria. He saw Oeilvert, and Madain Sari, and Ipsen’s Castle, and Black Mage Village… He could see them through an invigorated perspective outside the scope of fallen lives, and thereby detached from the great tree’s repertoire of memories.

(“…Now, the theory is undeniable.”)

He saw the exotic wilderness of Terra. He saw the ghastly architecture of Pandemonium. He saw the haunted conformity of Bran Bal. He could see with an enriched sense of color, and depth, and presence, as if it were all reality before him.

(“Life fears death…”)

He could see things, now, more quaint to him. A cluttered hideout, nestled under a dilapidated clock tower. A circular fountain, its pond stale and its base strewn with golden rubble and sand. A lake house, its roof burdened with pigeons. An airship, cruising over a bustling cityscape. A lazy windmill, its ridged blades clipping the afternoon sun into golden shards.

(“…but lives only to die.”)

And people… so many people. A Burmecian, clad in a heavy raincoat and bearing the coat of arms of the dragon clan. A portly man, furred lavender, his pointed ears and swinish snout well distinguished. A denizen of the Qu tribe, frolicking in the soupy mud of its native marshes, its limp tongue drooping stupidly from its carved grin. A corpulent woman in an outrageous costume, her blue, flaccid arms waving ecstatically. A stooped figure, riddled with tattoos, his mop of scarlet tangles bobbing hypnotically as he idly swung his ape-like arms from side to side.

(“It starts with anxiety.”)

Another man, weighted with plates of sturdy, if rusted, armor, and an ornate sheath, fit for a

broadsword, clapped to his back. An attractive woman in a white coat, the crest of her face shielded with a metal plate that covered one eye. An oglop with a cape…

(“Anxiety becomes fear.”)

A little girl, bouncing with energy, a dainty, pearly horn parting her violet hair.

(“Fear leads to anger…”)

A grayed, brooding man in a black coat, his exposed, lurid heart accenting his stern countenance.

(“…anger leads to hate…”)

An impish creature, garbed in stiff robes and a misshapen, pointed hat, with inquisitive eyes peering meekly from beneath.

(“…hate leads to suffering…”)

A man on the back of a silver dragon, adorned in snowy silk and feathers, and sporting an icy leer.

(“The only cure for this fear is total destruction.”)

A girl, barely of age. A snug orange pants suit traced her slender form, and a glittering pendant

danced on the chain fastened around her slim neck. Rich, dark hair washed down her shoulders and complemented her eyes—ones that bespoke an intelligence fraught with sorrow and passion, and glinted like garnets in her heart-shaped face.

She was singing…

He blinked. The pain was back. It never truly left. It was also dark again, but the flourish of images were still freshly impressed on his mind's eye. And he could still hear the music.

The trauma Iifa inflicted on him was paled by his visions—so much that, while mortal chills racked his gruesomely lacerated body, his hands trembled quietly without him. His respiration was rapid, but toned to a steady rhythm. His heart pounded ferociously behind his ears. His eyes searched wildly through the black, grasping to retain the shadow of a ghost. Its visage had deserted him, like a mirage before a deprived wanderer, leaving only a whimsy after-image.

I can hear her. I can hear the music. I could see her…

Reading her subject's disposition, and alerted to his regained consciousness, Iifa reflected

apprehension, and her talons clamped over his wrists and anchored his feet.

However, he could read her, in return. It was their mutual affliction—something Iifa toiled to filter for her own benefit, contrary to the creed of symbiosis. Her diligence now failed her. He could see through the darkness. Her motives were naked behind her transparent hypocrisy. The truth—his truth—her secret—was bare to his enlightened clarity.

Aiming to affirm her dominance before any further damage was done, Iifa dispatched a fibrous vein to pacify her subject. Her weapon was held to his neck. It was the same tactic she always employed, and never lost to. It would tame him, or break him, as symbiosis required, until his fear was her power, and her will became his. He had always retreated at the threat of losing his breath, and from this trend his resignation would be ensured.

He glared stonily into the void, piercing it like an eagle marking its prey. This time would be different. He wasn’t afraid.

He was pissed.

He was angry at the memories that abandoned him. He was angry at Iifa for hiding them. He was

even angry at the riddle master who stalked his dreams, refusing to make any sense. Beyond them, however, he was angry at himself, for wasting so much time, not fighting for the truth. He was going to fight now.

Summoning a strength hitherto unknown to him, he clenched the vine between his digits and wrung it fiercely, until it splintered and bled raw sap. Iifa was fazed, and the weed recoiled with a slurping gasp. With her chains lax, he shrugged out of her yoke and brawled with the elastic web spun around his limbs. Iifa recovered too immediately, and he was tackled by a writhing braid of sapwood. A yelp was jarred out of him as he collided with an ossified wall. The mob of tentacles bore down on him like a waterfall, impelling him to root into Iifa's callused skeleton. His lungs grudgingly compressed in their strict grip, and he gagged on the dust that showered from overhanging layers of once placid timber, now riled into action.

What is Subject doing? Resistance is irrational. Subject can not escape. Symbiosis will not allow it.

The riot smothered him, and that same adversary that fogged his memory was closing over his awareness and veiling the world in a stifling black

cloud. As Iifa smote his willpower and ground his composure into pulp, her baleful ordinance rang in his head.

We are symbiosis. We will be forever.

(“No!”)

…n..o…

(“We’ll destroy you and prove you wrong!”)

…it’s… wrong.

(“And through our memories, future generations will see that we can overcome any fear!”)

Can you still hear the music?

(“…You’ve done so much for us.”)

Iifa’s going to… assimilate..me… I… can’t fight…

(“If it weren’t for you, I probably would’ve led a meaningless life.”)

If you do not stop her…
you will become her.

(“With you, I was able to see so much of the world and meet so many people.”)

I hear her voice…

(“We faced many hardships, too…”)

(“but… I think I finally know what’s important.”)

If you surrender…
she will win.

I can still hear her song… I can still hear her voice…

(“Promise me one thing…
Please come back.”)

Do you understand?

There was a light—a brilliant flicker—behind, or beyond, or within—he couldn’t find or know, but it was with him. And he saw. And he remembered.

And Iifa’s greatest fear came true.

There… is no… symbiosis.

(“At last…”)

He couldn’t swear that he had done it—not on his own. He was moving. Sandwiched between an army of trampling weeds and a grainy stone slab, he piled his strength into his hands, pushed into the gnarled cliff in front of him, and drove off the vines piled on

his back until an inhabitable cleft emerged. He gasped, taking relief in the pocket of air he forged. Iifa, committed to blatant force, pressed his face into the wall again and smashed the revitalizing bubble.

(“…life has uncovered this truth.”)

The light flared into a vaporous white glow. His fingers and toes cleaved into Iifa’s chapped skin, bracing against the petrified edifice as he pried himself apart from it once more. He shifted onto one shoulder, turned into the myriad of animated ropes, and curled back his free elbow, drawing it against the pliable net like an arrow against the string of a bow. His trapped breath hissed out in a venomous growl.

(“Now, it is time to end this world.”)

His arm launched out like a cannon shot. It was a bleary, luminous wisp in front of him. It ruptured the fabric of Iifa’s cage, shattering its wires like brittle noodles. Pitched into hysteria, the mauled weeds squirmed erratically around him, as dysfunctional as a vat of worms. He crawled purposefully through the confused foliage, groping for a stable foothold, but instead fell into the habit of a diver, swimming towards the surface.

Just as his hope of meeting the end of the squirming labyrinth wavered, his arm broke away from the swamp, and his skin sampled the crisp, cool air outside. He scrambled to disengage himself from the mire altogether, dislodging one entangled limb after the other, until his upper half greeted the atmosphere at last. He inhaled ravenously, tasting the vacant expanse around him and quivering with the joy and danger of freedom.

The world he encountered was morbidly black, but the light was his power, hot and vengeful. He wore it like a cloak that danced in the subtle draughts and shimmered with the elegance of rolling water. Fluorescent feathers would flake off and gracefully drift over the vicinity, littering it with fleeting glimpses of ash and fetid celadon, before they extinguished like skittish fireflies.

A yawning, cavernous howl resonated about the chamber and roared through him, cutting short his breath and spoiling his moment of elation. He peered madly into the echoes, anticipating an incursion from the abyss. With everything below his waist still constrained in the bog, his agility was impaired, so he adopted the pose of a snarling canine. He crouched over the bed of weeds he was growing out of, his hackles raised, his elbows rigid

and his weight on his palms as Iifa's gritty embroidery bit into them.

Come and get me, you bitch.

Iifa obliged, rewarding his challenge with a mammoth tentacle from the pit of her nether chambers. It swung broadly towards its target, the air erupting in a hollow shriek as it yielded to the ponderous stick. The noise hailed from every corner, and his willful glow was too weak to infiltrate the vast space enclosing him, so anything careening his way wasn't noticed until it was on him. He ducked into the prickly quag as the branch nearly shaved off his bristling hair and crashed into something solid overhead. An explosive crack signaled that it was some spare feet away.

He sprang upright and turned to meet the clamor, but only in time to watch the lumbering tentacle whip back into his sphere of sight and overtake him. Its breadth was enough for a tree, on its own, and in two twists it enveloped him like a hungry boa. He was mashed into its lethal hold like a clay doll; pinned between serrated warts that barbed his tender flesh and evoked veteran agonies. Blood was fresh on him as it pooled around the rims of invasive thorns.

Oblivious to his crippling injuries, he navigated the mossy folds until his wrists molded around the meat of Iifa's arm. He rallied the tendrils of energy teeming around him and clutched them by the reins, taking their radiant power into his own hands. Through his focused rage, they coalesced into extensions of his fingers, and weaved over and under the trunk of the vine until they had sewn a lustrous cuff. He drew the bright threads into himself, and they closed around the branch, sealing it in a vice.

Once Iifa's death grip was reciprocated, he seized the initiative, clenched his jaw and urged the materialized cords to constrict. The task proved to be a trial on both his weary mind and his overexerted body, for the tree was no less dense than healthy wood should be. With one long breath he stocked his strength in his forelimbs, clung fast to the serpent's girth, and squeezed fiercely, returning its karma. It was like hugging a cement column, at first; no work came out of it, but his hold was as unrelenting as Iifa's, nevertheless.

His eyelids burned in the gleaming light as much as his muscles did in the strain, but with sputtering grunts he won progress. The timber groaned and crunched in his arms, and hairline fissures laced its

bark as the vine's integrity was compromised. He heard a definite crack in the belly of the tentacle, like the cock of a shotgun. With a finishing heave and a roar from the bottom of his ribs, the structure snapped in twain with a torrent of malachite splinters.

He educed an arsenal of superhuman abilities with a surge of exhilaration. The pain was suddenly bright and brilliant, and he was invincible. He was saturated with the light; empowered by its limitless potential. He felt he could conquer anything and everything. It was an agony and an euphoria and a chaos he relished like a coveted prize, for it was his to use to wreck and destroy and kill and rage and that he would surely do; he would rage until there was nothing left of Iifa or Subject or symbiosis or memories anything to hold him back ever again.

Iifa's burly vine unfurled and reared into the stance of an excited cobra, while its decapitated extremity lay in a useless wreath around her subject. He had no time to revel in his Herculean accomplishment before the active half of the snake lunged at him again. In a feat of dexterity, his hands found the tapered end of the dismembered limb, claimed it for a weapon, and hoisted the entire branch against its pursuing counterpart, flailing it

through the air like a giant, supple club. He was amazed that, with the limb's awesome mass, momentum didn't pluck it from his grasp with every swing. He watched almost dazedly as he wielded the hefty weed with an innate deftness, as if it was no more cumbersome than a pencil. An ethereal glow trailed from his arms and dissipated in the air like steam as he stiffly tugged the bludgeon into the serpent's path. It connected with a devastating boom, wedged into the stump's blunt face like an axe, and fractured it neatly down its spine. Both cracked open like eggs and tumbled over the floor of Iifa's inner cavity in mangled chips.

With the latest threat demolished, he tended to his legs, still confined in a nest of weeds. He sank a clawed hand into the top layer of wires and sheered them off in one clean sheet, then kicked vigorously until his feet could take hold on the surface. After attempting to take a full step out of the mush, he learned with dismay and an excruciating jolt that some external force kept him soundly grounded. He twisted around to examine behind him, and drew in with his infirm vision what had only mocked him blindly before. A tether of fine, knotted strands climbed out of the bog and latched onto the small of his back. More accurately, he realized, with a mixed

expression of horror and outrage, the cable hooked into his back—interred in his living flesh and bone, and integrated with his essential systems.

It made the kind of sense that made him sick. Before the “s” word could manifest in his thoughts, he turned on the rope, vehemently wrung the ligament between his hands, and with a beastly snarl split it like a reed, severing the lifeline with a liberating sense of finality. He might as well have broken his own leg, however, because he was instantaneously skewered with a pain befitting his impetuous escape. He collapsed on his knees and arched into a crude anguish, wauling like a bear in a steel trap. A warm oil dripped from the mangled tip of his cut line and freckled his ankles with scarlet spots. As unpleasant as his method was, it was still preferred over tearing the vines out by their roots, and taking some desired organs with them.

His hasty recuperation was spurred by a precipitated riot. A quavering wail from the regions of hell rattled the tree’s foundation, and the dark room was animated all at once. The shrouded chamber’s population of pillars undulated menacingly. Their embossed stripes peeked out of the odious black curtain and rippled in his white torch.

He staggered to his hands and feet, wary, but ready. In the thick of darkness he was a beacon, incriminating his position by virtue of his powerful light. To him, this didn't matter, because no matter how outnumbered he may have been, he didn't plan to hide.

Iifa struck first. A chain of roots shot out of the black and dug a narrow rut in the mat of weeds. He rolled out of its path as the tentacle ripped across the patch of grass like lightning. Another blade swooped out of the velvet firmament and clipped a wide swathe in garden beneath his feet, spraying him with mulch and ashen sand. An extra sense watched it coming, and his reflexes pitched him in the air like a grasshopper while plant matter painted over his coat of blood. At the peak of his jump, he nimbly dodged another sharp slash, thrown at him from behind.

He realized through his quick maneuvers that he could see without seeing, and sense before it happened. Time itself seemed to slow down, bent to his fighting spirit. Even gravity was at his command, and the ground as he knew it never returned to him. He was a white flame, climbing into the palpable darkness. Iifa's barrage swept around him, but never through him. He could bounce off her attacks, and glide through the air like a fish through water.

He fled skyward, scaling the core of Iifa's trunk with a flock of vines hounding his every spring and jump. A handful of roots raked at his heels. He stepped off the longest finger, pivoted in mid-flight, and targeted one of its accomplices. A pulse of energy fired from his palm, and the digit shattered like a string of beads.

He turned toward the ceiling and pressed onward, but an elusive sapling lassoed his tail—a costly reminder that he had one. He was violently yanked backward, downward, then sideways, and shuttled into a wall. The shingled bark imploded like mortarless bricks, and he was sparsely buried in debris. The culprit released his hapless tail and moved for the kill, but it was his tail that refused to let go. The prehensile appendage choked off the sapling's advance and secured its place while he channeled a counterattack into his fingertips. He readied a magnesium flare that chased the shadows into the tunnel's polar corners and lit Iifa from the inside like a fluorescent bulb.

The stored energy discharged in an opalescent bubble. The explosion swallowed the captive vine and obliterated everything within ten feet of it. As the destruction dimmed, he shoved out of his crater and hovered in the epicenter, miraculously

unscathed. He apprehensively glanced down the height of the hollowed trunk, and noted that throughout his ascent, the diameter of his battleground had dwindled from that of a castle to that of a small room. The cap of the organic mountain couldn’t be more than bounds away. He raced for the top before the fried vine’s reinforcements arrived to fence him in.

Surely as he expected, a broth of weeds boiled out of the pit of the chute like an erupting volcano. As they encroached on him, a clog at the end of the tunnel loomed into sight, welded into place with wood and clay. He sprinted ahead, disregarding Iifa’s grim fortification. His feet, toothed with spiked cleats in lieu of toes, skipped across the sedimented shelves like a lizard over a pane of water. He galloped airily on four limbs, as limber and swift in a vertical climb as a cheetah over a flat meadow.

The end of the road rose into view, and a distant rumbling and wan flash taunted him from beyond it. He didn’t pause for it, but rather pounced on a bar bisecting his path, rocketed off it like a spring, and punched through the hull of Iifa’s trunk, which kicked open like a rickety latch. He plunged headlong into an alien world—a ocean of twigs and

sagging cables, lapped at ruthlessly by liquid bullets and gusty charges. Drenched, rustling leaves meshed into a loud, disorienting static. He was introduced to a cold, stinging wet that stunned his system and tossed him into the fray without his senses.

He barreled recklessly through the flora, his ragged clothes and hair catching every sprig and snag en route. He flinched under the onslaught and tucked into a flimsy ball until the planet decided to right itself or he quit falling—pending on which came first. He encountered a jutting bough and rolled into its cradle, garnering a streak of blisters.

As soon as he plunked into the wooden niche and reclaimed his bearings, as well as his breath, Iifa's poachers were after him again. A weedy salvo filed out of the depths of the tree itself, perforating the bark, looping over his back, and stitching him into the seat of a fork. He wrenched off the wire pinching the nape of his neck and roared savagely, calling the mighty light to his whim again. He lifted an arm against the taut ropes and hammered his fist into Iifa's skin, crafting a smart dinge. The great timber shuddered, and her regiment of vines retracted like a startled sea anemone.

Her maladaptive subject was relinquished into the wild, and with a determined leap he took to the lofty jungle. Carried on the wings of a trance, he darted around the melee of branches, wound through the sagging hoops of vines, and finally cleared Iifa's canopy, soaring into the tempest outside.

The atmosphere was bleak with the night, but ablaze with a storm. The clouds raved and bickered, voicing their grievances with luminous spears and clashing mail. He sailed against the tumultuous backdrop like an iridescent comet, swaying in the gales and riding the waves of rain.

He was free… he was free… he was finally free…

As the heavens fired up to celebrate, his evanescent light began to extinguish, and he was instilled with an irrepressible languor. The power melted away, and he found himself helplessly drifting into inertia. He watched with a pang of despair as the indistinct landscape drew closer and the sky fell out of reach.

…sky so dark… lightning so bright… thunder so loud… wind so hard… rain so cold… world spins so fast…

…light… gone…

Bobby Corwen wasn't cooperating as he usually did, but Nuef didn't blame him. The last night's rain had transformed the mountain trail into a mud rink, and every step was a feat of balance. The typically light-footed beast of burden staggered uneasily over the slick obstacle coarse. His rider clung mercilessly to Bobby's tawny yellow plumage, lest he drop into the murky trough and join the filth that was kicked up into the bird's underbelly.

Nuef wasn't easily irritated, and even this arduous journey to Conde Petie didn't faze his placid disposition. The chocobo, on the other hand, was a temperamental creature, and Bobby juggled his passenger and load of goods with deliberate awkwardness in a passive-aggressive form of protest.

Bobby Corwen, once a pet and a novelty, had grown into a practical asset for the Black Mage Village. The trip to Conde Petie used to be made on foot; riding a chocobo not only saved time and effort, but also extended their trading route to a moogle-inhabited village on the northern rim of the

continent, Madain Sari. It was from the moogle's business that Nuef now departed, ready to trek home by way of the dwarf village.

Nuef secured the bag of supplies with one arm, and hooked the other around Bobby's tall neck. He couldn't afford to soil his delivery; his fellow genomes and the black mages would sorely disapprove. Trade with the dwarves and moogles was the only thing that sustained his own village.

As the pair struggled up a clay staircase, Bobby planted his stalky legs in the earth and froze. Nuef, imagining the bird's complaints, urged the chocobo onward despite them. Bobby shook his crested head fervently and refused with a pigeon's purr.

"What's the matter?" Nuef appealed to his transport, faintly aware of how senseless it was to communicate with a speechless animal that way.

Bobby lurched forward, bowling up an adjacent path and carting his passenger in the wrong direction. Nuef was ready to chastise his unwieldy ride when the chocobo surfed onto a solid hill and stopped.

"Kweh!"

“What are you doing? This is the wrong way,” Nuef flatly corrected him. Bobby merely flicked his beak at him, trying to convey annoyance. His rider was vexed. He leaned over one of the bird’s stumpy wings and examined the ground. Bobby was perched on what looked to be a fallen tree, but when his eye caught the horizon, Nuef surmised that it was probably one of the Iifa Tree’s far-flung roots. He was quieted before the tropical vista that stretched out below him, and the living monument that towered above the adolescent jungle.

Iifa was a permanent feature of the continent, if not the planet—a landmark as prominent as a skyscraper, and as archaic as the Eidolon Wall. It bloomed over the western valley like a petrified mushroom. The summoner tribe once labeled it “the ancient tree of life,” and the dwarves call its garden “Sanctuary,” but Nuef’s village held a less romantic view of it.

Genomes were not an ignorant people. They were inherently aware of the purpose of their existence, and their relationship to Iifa. It was knowledge their creator ingrained in their largely vacant mindsets. The black mages owed their vitality to the mother tree’s handiwork, the Mist, and spoke of Iifa with grim reverence. Both races understood the tree’s

birthright: to weed out Gaia's souls, and gradually replace them with Terra's.

It was a master scheme that met an untimely end at the hands of a small band of righteous Gaians. With Terra destroyed and the sacred tree thereby decommissioned, Mikoto, the genome tribe's leader, maintained that Iifa's lands were hallowed ground—the gravesite of the two greatest genomes to yet walk Gaia.

Now that Nuef thought about it, she never spoke otherwise of them…

Bobby shifted in place uneasily, breaking Nuef's musings. The restless animal skidded down the earthen ramp, taking the genome further off course. Nuef strictly objected to the detour and worked to reassert their direction. The chocobo skied to a halt and picked up a tantrum.

'Are all of Gaia's life-forms this stubborn?' he wondered.

"Kweh!" the bird answered.
("Kweh!")

Nuef clumsily dismounted and offered the animal some space. Bobby trumpeted like a frantic seal.

Nuef didn’t understand the chocobo’s problem until he turned around.

It was so bright. He almost couldn’t stand it. The sun. He assumed it was the sun, at least. Only the sun could be that garish and intrusive. His eyes were closed, but that did little for him. Sunshine filtered through his eyelids and into his throbbing skull. It gave him a headache. Or made the one he had worse. It was hard to tell. How long had he been awake? He missed his own light. That hurt, too, but it was a different pain. He almost liked it. This new light wasn’t the same.

Nuef hesitantly paced towards the brambles skirting the mountain trail, his attention fixed on the fleshy lump resting within. Bobby was flustered by the lingering scent of blood, and continued to squawk furiously.

“Kweh!”
(“Kweh!”)

“Kweh!”

(…chocobo…?)

He wanted to see it. It must have been close by. Opening his eyes was a sour mistake. The light poured in, much burning ensued, and he clenched

his eyelids shut to squeeze it back out. It was a hardship, but his pupils eventually adjusted to the overpowering brilliance, and a blurry world was unveiled.

(…Hello?)

There was someone standing over him. To his mild surprise, it wasn't a chocobo—just some random genome. The boy's shock of golden hair dangled in front of his bulbous eyes, which seemed incapable of diverting from his own. It was a very disconcerting stare.

(…What's this guy's problem?)

Without his light, he was drained of his power, and all the belated repercussions of his condition flooded back into his bones. Every muscle and joint were lame with atrophy and sore with battle. It was a wonder to him that his respiration wasn't paralyzed with exhaustion, as well, although the act of it was quickly tiring. He could only fight to remain conscious and blink lazily at the passer-by, quietly prepared to be gawked at.

This the traveler did well, and for some minutes, it looked like the only thing he could do. He thanked the fate that didn't have a mirror handy, because he

couldn't bear to see what had fixed the young genome's expression into bemused shock, especially considering the impassive nature of their race.

The scene's prevalent element was blood. It was everywhere. Nuef gaped at the vaguely humanoid figure sprawled over the bushes, unsure what to make of it.

It was another genome, he logically discerned from the presence of a tail, albeit a frail, battered one. Every breath seemed at the expense of his last words, and his fragile being trembled with the effort. He was clad in a collage of muddy crimson, bleached blue, and livid green that spared no clean spot, from his bloodied, war-shaven tail to his disheveled hair, dyed in the jungle's camouflage. Rents in the shambles that he wore exposed his emaciated ribs, which inflated and receded feebly like gills. His eyes were dizzy and clouded, and he squinted as if the whole world was something hurtful to behold. For a pregnant minute Nuef wondered if he would soon witness this roadside diversion's death.

Nuef's lips formed around many noiseless words, until something worth saying croaked out.

"A-Are you okay, mister?"

He blinked. It was too absurd.

Nuef was perplexed by his response. The sickly genome blinked at him with a flicker of vitality. His cheek twitched, then pulled the right half of his face into a faint smile. His chest convulsed with a queer snort, which was followed by another, until the sound escalated into an outrageous cackle.

It hurt to laugh so hard. He didn't even know he had it in him. Actually, it hurt to do anything, but it was a good pain—a different pain—a new, refreshing pain. Freedom hurt, but it was worth it. Because he could see light. Because he could hear the whistle and sigh of the outdoors, and the melody of another person's voice. Because he could move, and breathe, and live.

Because he remembered everything.

And he understood.

"How did you survive…?"

I didn't have a choice.
I had to live.

I wanted to come home to you.

So…
I sang your song.

Our song.

—FIN—

I never had so much fun abusing page formatting, sentence fragments, run-ons, semi-colons, dashes, and the laws of English grammar in general.

Thanks to Mercutio for supplying me with the name of the plains outside the Iifa Tree (he has a short FF9 fic, “Wrong,” that is worth looking at, if you can find it.) I lost my copy of FF9 half-way through writing this, and therefore couldn’t look it up for myself. It’s still lost… poor me.
I also thank my Oxford Concise Dictionary, my sister (for help with French, and for general proof-reading—you’re a real sport), and what scraps I remember from freshmen biology.

I’m a little miffed that doesn’t take advanced formatting. Otherwise, this fic would have looked a little less… er… confusing. I’m a sucker for aesthetics, you see.…Oh well.

Anyway, congratulations (and thanks…?) to anyone who actually made it to the end of this. I need sleep, now. Lots of sleep.

—the neiphiti dragon

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